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I

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet.”

– *Romeo and Juliet* (II, ii, 1-2), *William Shakespeare*

A group of apparently wealthy, well-dressed housewives with slightly too much make-up, and slightly too much jewellery, burst into a European-style furniture store in Causeway Bay, Hong Kong. They tore up the bedsheets, knocked over the tables and chairs, yelled, and generally caused mayhem. Miss Fu, the store manager, told Elaine and Wendy, two other assistants, and me, then only 18 years old, to try to reason with the women while she called for the police.

“How dare you stand there so brazenly, after seducing our husbands?” shouted one of the women.

“You chickens [Hong Kong slang for prostitutes], show us what you have that’s so good! You don’t just sell beds, you whores hop onto them with our husbands!”

Elaine, Wendy and I were scared and nervous. So was Miss Fu, but she stood her ground, hands on hips, feet firmly planted, and responded: “Look at yourselves, you stupid, spoilt bitches! No wonder your men run after other women. Your husbands aren’t here. Go and look for them in a whore house!”

The most slightly built of the women was sure this defence confirmed that Miss Fu really did have something to hide. She grabbed Miss Fu’s hair and yelled, “You slut, selling beds has turned you into one yourself! How

can you even think of being my husband's mistress? Why don't you take a look at yourself? You ugly, dried-up old spinster!"

Ironically, another commented: "Your husband must have poor taste. How else could he fuck a bitch like her?"

The slightly-built one let Miss Fu go and asked, "If it's not you, then who is it?" They looked at us accusingly. Eventually, all eyes landed on Elaine.

"This slut has a mole as big as a broad bean," one of the women said. "She may not be a whore, but she could be their pimp." This stunned poor Elaine, whose jaw dropped visibly. Then, fingers stabbed at Wendy's face. "Men wouldn't touch her poxy face, but they'd love to feel her huge tits." Wendy flushed profusely.

Suddenly, the largest of the marauding women shouted directly at me, "Look at her, thin eyes and thick lips, a born chicken." I was nervous, confused, and angry.

The police arrived within twenty minutes and took the worst of the troublemakers away. There was little sympathy for the remaining women who were left licking their wounds. It seemed to them they were the victims. They were surrounded by a damned pimp, a deserted spinster, whores, a born chicken with narrow eyes and full lips, and a girl with bad skin and annoyingly full breasts; and to add insult to injury, the police were on their side.

For weeks after the showdown, Elaine remained embarrassed at the public ridicule of her mole, and resigned. Wendy reacted badly when Miss Fu continued to remind her of the comments on her skin and breasts, implying blame of some sort. Finally, Wendy sought satisfaction in a settlement arranged by the labour union.

My own supposed "chicken look" was destined to make me the butt of continued jibes. After a row with staff members who were making fun of me, I was fired by Miss Fu.

I was only 18, and found the accusation of having a "chicken look" much more shameful than anything else I could imagine. Years later, I still feel the shame. Even now, as an adult I will look at myself in the

mirror to try to see if the accusation has any validity, and to find any sign that I am a good woman.

One of the housewives eventually admitted they had made a mistake and should have gone into the shop next door. The housewives' collective jealousy had erroneously affected the lives of innocent individuals and left me with a powerful memory.

Although confused at the time, with the benefit of hindsight I can see many implications and emotions in the events at the furniture store. The loathing married women have for prostitutes; fear of ageing and loss of attractiveness; competition between females for the same source of security. Objectively, it is easier to blame the most remote party, i.e. the supposed prostitute, rather than the man. Push the man too far and he takes his patronage elsewhere, which creates a self-fulfilling accusation, whether or not a prostitute is the cause.

Imagine if the definition of prostitution was broadened to cover not just cash but security, housing, clothes, and a generally more comfortable life in return for such benefits as companionship, sexual availability, a housekeeper, birth mother, and child minder. It could then be argued that the angry women were simply single-client prostitutes trying to frighten off freelance prostitutes competing for the same source of benefits and security.

Prostitution is often called the oldest profession. It is probably more accurate to call it the oldest business. Despite its many forms, the common factor is an exchange of usually, but not always, money, given in return for sex of some kind. In this context, 'sex' is used to describe any benefit arriving from a person of the opposite sex: non-contact companionship, friendly affection, outings as an apparent couple, all the way through to full sexual intercourse and its many variations.

Whenever and whatever the demand, there has always been a supply, and vice versa. Which drives which? Chickens and eggs in an eternal circle.

In literature and the visual arts, the prostitute is typically portrayed by reference to quite clearly defined clichés: a superficially sweet and appealing creature hiding an underlying, hard-edged cynicism; a downtrodden, used and abused wretch; or a happy hooker in full control acting out of choice, living proof of Darwin's notion that the female chooses the male. This was a shocking concept to Darwin's male contemporaries, and despite its compatibility with biological evolution, it remains uncomfortably at odds with much feminist thinking on the subject of *female* sex workers. The feminist view of *male* sex workers is rather more fuzzy.

Prostitution is a classic case of proximity determining perception. In another country, it may be seen as a fascinating aspect of an exotic culture, something different and exciting. In the next town, it is a social ill, about which something really should be done. In the street in which one lives, it is a terrible, disgusting, immoral, depraved business operated by cheap criminals and even cheaper women.

In truth, people who suppose themselves to be morally superior would rather not acknowledge the existence of prostitution in their own society, its existence being a reflection of aspects of self. Such prejudice is deeply rooted. It serves to reinforce notions of moral superiority and justifies a lack of concern about the welfare and dignity of prostitutes.

Pragmatically, however uncomfortable it may be, societies ought to accept that prostitution is here to stay. If all the might of the United States could not eradicate the urge to drink alcoholic beverages during the Prohibition era, then eradicating an aspect of hormonally driven human behaviour, fundamental to existence, is not an initiative likely to succeed.

In Hong Kong today, it is possible to find those involved in 'public relations', massage girls, karaoke hostesses, house hookers and streetwalkers without too much difficulty.

Police Crackdown on Prostitution and *Women's Prison Cells Jammed* are common themes in Hong Kong newspaper headlines. Political parties, hand-in-hand with local community representatives, take to the streets to demonstrate against prostitution in peaceful neighbourhoods. Voluntary

groups who care for the prostitutes protest that political parties use an anti-prostitution stance to gain political capital. Counter demonstrations, although attracting small numbers wearing masks, provide an interesting if not overwhelming spectacle, holding banners stating “Prostitute Rights = Human Rights”.

Should prostitution be legalised? Should red-light districts be set up? What impact does prostitution have on youngsters? What effect does it have on community and family life? These controversial questions frequently initiate heated debates among women’s groups, religious organisations, feminists, political parties, neighbourhood communities and various government agencies.

A British Catholic nun once told me an interesting story. During the course of doing social work, her co-worker once helped a pretty girl who was a college graduate working as a prostitute in a nightclub. The young girl spent her hard-earned money on young male prostitutes. My curiosity was aroused by this seeming paradox, and I was interested to find other examples of apparently contradictory behaviour.

Idly surfing the internet one day, I found the website of Norma Jean Almodovar, an established, successful police officer who, at the age of 32, decided to leave the Los Angeles Police Department and sell her body. She wrote a short article entitled ‘Sex/Prostitution/Power’, in which she claimed that prostitution out of choice is not pitiful at all, but empowers women to enjoy sex without the emotional burdens associated with steady relationships. Taking an agreed service fee from a man freed her from the need to submit to a partner, a husband or a boss, as ‘respectable’ women do. In fact, she encourages all women to consider prostitution as a profession.

Are these examples of the mythical ‘happy hooker’? Despite my curiosity and best efforts, I could not find the co-worker of the British nun to verify her story.

We live in a commercial civilization, defined by materialism, which discriminates more against the poor than against the prostitute. Women who seem particularly mean-spirited towards prostitutes are usually those

who do not benefit from this materialism, and don't receive romantic attention or appreciative gifts from their husbands.

An acquaintance of mine, Ling Ling, recently migrated to Hong Kong from mainland China. She brags about her three boyfriends there who, while not married to her, still give her a sense of security. One of them is an old man with no time or energy who sees her every two weeks, while providing her with a monthly allowance of US\$2,500.

Another acquaintance, Wanda, is ostensibly a ballet dancer. Despite Wanda's lack of success as a dancer, her mother is always boasting about her daughter's ability and ambition. Wanda's true ambitions seem directed elsewhere. She only picks wealthy prospects. Client A covers the cost of overseas study for both her brother and sister, B supplies her with fashionable clothes, C takes her to exclusive clubs, and D has bought her a yacht. Wanda may not be that pretty, but she seems to have the power to engender competitive jealousy. Being seen with A increases her desirability in the eyes of B, and being seen with B makes C determined to buy her a fancy car.

I have had several relationships and I still do not have a house or a car. Hearing these stories of opportunistic girls makes me think: perhaps I am wasting my natural "chicken look".

The modern world seems ready not only to tolerate prostitutes, but to return their dignity, previously denied by thousands of years of abuse. The change in attitudes interested me sufficiently to want to investigate the reality as it exists in Hong Kong, and produce a written record.

The problem became what to write, and how? There is little reference material available about Hong Kong prostitutes, even in academic libraries. In *The History of Prostitution in Hong Kong*, Ng Ho describes the Western District of Hong Kong in the 1930s and 1940s, a time considered the age of romance. The whorehouse was then the place for rich men to show off their wealth, enabling prostitutes to live in luxury way beyond the imagination of the typical housewife. These pampered celebrity whores would often dominate their male sponsors.

British journalist Kate Whitehead recently penned *After Suzie*. (*The World of Suzie Wong* was a bestselling 1950s novel about Hong Kong prostitutes. It was adapted into the movie of the same name that helped create the Suzie Wong stereotype of the Hong Kong prostitute.) The author's materials come mainly from police files, making *After Suzie* essentially a reference work that does not contain significant character depiction.

I decided the best approach was to meet a few Suzies! With this plan in mind, I mobilised my meagre resources and set off to look at the sharp end of the business.

Fred is an executive director of a large company, and he took me to Club Bboss in Tsim Sha Tsui East for a business meeting with Mr Leung, a regular visitor to expensive hostess clubs. Mr Leung is a generous man with a good sense of humour, and he is popular with the hostesses. His hero is Zhang Wuji in the famous kung fu novel *Heroes and Heroines*. He adopted the nickname Wuji because he is so fond of the clubs where he finds his 'heroines'.

One evening, at 10:30pm, Fred led me through the grandiose lobby of Bboss, along an ornate corridor and into a huge hall decorated in French baroque style. The coffee table in the centre was as big as two king-size beds and circled by huge sofas. The only other guest present was Wuji, who was accompanied by three girls in nightgowns. Fred introduced me to a middle-aged woman in a black uniform. This was mama-san Monica of Team 98. Wuji had already told her of my intentions.

Monica looked 40, clean, neatly dressed, and gracefully mannered, putting to shame the slovenly behaviour of the three smoking hostesses. Monica's husband was the manager there, and the couple would work until the last customer left. The club's male managers had different functions. They arranged the meetings between the girls and customers, helping to make customers feel more respected. After Monica's husband had welcomed Wuji into the club, and before Fred and I arrived, Wuji had opened a super-sized bottle of XO cognac, and was happy for two

girls to just sit with him while he paid for their time in full. This typically profligate expenditure ensured his sky-high popularity.

Monica did not look like the classic mama-san as often depicted in popular films. As she put it, "Movies always demonise us." She told me that the movie *Stars/Moon/Sun* was about prostitutes, and that she had worked with the producer and director to make the script commercial. I remembered the film and perhaps that had contributed towards my negative impression of the mama-san. Monica said the girls nowadays were cheap, and did not even want to spend money to dress decently. Customers did not even bother to remember their names, content just to recognise them by their dress and general appearance. This increasingly impersonal attitude over her 20-year career made her feel ashamed: the girls were not as professional as before and had no interest in making any effort to attract men. They felt that simply making themselves available was sufficient.

When I asked her how much social prejudice the girls suffered, she said there was no prejudice at all; being a hostess was perfectly all right. So I rephrased the question: "How do the girls deal with prejudice and discrimination?" This was met with a burst of laughter from Wuji, who ridiculed the notion and said, "My wife used to be a hostess, so you tell me, what prejudice do I have?"

One of the girls then said, "Customers here are quite decent and nice to us."

"Your idea is old, you are thinking of 30 years ago," added Monica's husband.

I believe many customers don't despise the girls. It is a simple transaction and both parties get what they want. My interest in the question of external prejudice led me to ask, "When the girls reveal their real work to their families and friends, what happens?"

Another girl said, "We never want to talk about it, and we don't have to, so there's not much trouble."

"Everyone watches over his privacy nowadays," said Monica's husband. "People in other trades don't talk much about what they do or where they

work. Plus, these girls are not chickens. Your question is for the pimps in Mong Kok [an area of cheap clubs and brothels].”

To claim the hostesses in Club Bboss are not chickens is a fine distinction. Nothing may happen on the club premises, where the girl is a hostess only. A customer may, however, buy her time and take her outside where he deals directly with her, usually for sex transactions. Even if a hostess's time is not bought in this way, she still makes the waitress income. This means she does not have to make overt advances or tolerate groping from customers. Once taken outside, if they only went for the meal and did not accept further deals, they would become known as uncooperative and the mama-san would definitely fire them. So how is it they are not chickens?

Monica answered, “I’ll give you many breathtaking stories for your book, but please don’t portray the hostesses as chickens.” One hostess in a revealing outfit was keen to add, “Of course we are not chickens.”

Monica talked me into singing. I wanted to sing a Japanese song, so she immediately called over a girl who knew Japanese. Fred said we shouldn’t call over any more girls, but Monica simply looked the other way and said he was drunk.

Then another mama-san walked in with one more girl. Fred told that mama-san the three of us did not need a fourth girl, but she pretended not to hear. This annoyed Fred and he whispered in my ear, “You must sing hard, the songs here are very expensive!”

I asked Wuji why he liked to fool around in these places. He said he found nightclubs simultaneously the most relaxing and the most exciting places to ease away the tensions and suspicions between strangers. He said striking a business deal takes at most 15 minutes, but even when a deal is secured after straight business talk, one still feels a bit upset and not so sure if it was the right decision. He claimed that if the deal took place in a nightclub, things would be completely different. Firstly, he could let the hostess make the small talk, and pretty soon, everybody would be in a relaxed and romantic mood, which greatly lowered the level of anxiety and suspicion: good for a successful deal. Once trust was

built, a long-term partnership could be expected.

I joked with Wuji, “Then businesswomen should go to duck [toy boy] houses.” Fred cut in, “Theoretically you are correct, but this is a man’s world.”

Wuji told me he was a man with a tremendous need for love, and there were many lovely girls in the nightclubs, so he was always crazily in love. Gradually, the wine went to my head, and a hostess with a cigarette was singing a pop song about love and hate. The room was filled with loud music and erotic expectation. The men were feeling the girls’ thighs. The singing hostess imbued the sentimental lyrics of the cheap song with surprising power, enough for the sugary tune to make me experience the intended romantic yearning. I finally understood Wuji’s comments about relaxation, excitement, and crazy love. At that moment, in that company, the sensations were infectious and I felt that I too could succumb.

At 2:20 in the morning, the bill of HK\$15,000 (US\$2,000) arrived. I was shocked, but Wuji paid up calmly, saying it was perfectly reasonable for the wine and four girls’ working time. I knew I would never again be able to afford meeting nightclub hostesses at their place of work!

I hopped into a cab alone, still missing the sexual ambience. The driver asked me: “Just knocked off? How is business going?” He took me to be a hostess. I was so embarrassed that I immediately made up a story. This made me feel guilty, because deep in my heart I was experiencing a subtle sympathy for the hostesses who claim they are not chickens.

My friend Ray is a painter. He introduced me to a great beauty from Dalian, who he had met in a nightclub. She told me she had come to Hong Kong to visit her relatives and planned to stay for half a year. Living in Tsim Sha Tsui, an area with many hostess clubs, she slept during the day and went out at night. When people made sexual jokes, she would put on the naive look of a virgin. Obviously she did not want me to find out about her business. Seeing she wanted to make friends, however, I took her out to lunch and got straight to the point. I asked whether she could recommend a hooker for my interview. Her answer was a firm “No”.

After drawing a blank with Ray's lady from Dalian, I needed another plan to find a genuine chicken.

There was a news report about 'Purple Vine' – an NGO fighting for sex workers' rights, founded by a Ms Yip, a former member of a labour union.

The aim of Purple Vine was to form the first sex workers' union in Hong Kong. I decided I must meet Ms Yip. Through three introductions, I finally managed to arrange a meeting in a café. She greeted me aggressively with "What's so special about prostitutes that you want to write about them?"

While I was struggling for a quick answer, she said seriously, "If you want to write about the miserable life of the prostitute, I'd suggest you quit, all hooker literature is the same old shit."

I was excited to find she shared my opinion. Ms Yip continued in a bitter tone: "If sex workers' rights as promoted by feminists are accepted, will society one day treat sex workers just like sales assistants in department stores?"

I tried to make her feel that I was on her side. "When sex workers enjoy human rights, they won't have to go to the underworld for protection or rely on drugs as an escape. If society can accept prostitutes as a permanent phenomenon, then why not deal with it, and provide them legal protection? Governments can raise tax from their activities and they can be offered sex education, medical treatment and welfare facilities."

My answer didn't please Ms Yip. Her tone was still hard: "Nothing new in your talk. Churchgoers will attack you for violating family values."

"Prostitutes have always coexisted with the marriage system and they have never challenged family values," I replied.

Ms Yip continued, "We advocates of sex worker rights only want to stress that prostitution is just another type of work. Our opponents say prostitution is like drug trafficking, which is forbidden in a healthy society. How do you reply to that? From the feminist perspective, it's an even more complex picture. There are many schools of feminist ideology, and some say if prostitution was legalised, women would be reduced to the

status of a commodity for consumption by men, and this would enhance the rule of patriarchy. How will your book deal with these charges?" I had no immediate reply.

She continued to lecture me: "A few months' research and you will only come up with a cheap shot like a new *Suzie Wong*."

I accepted this might be true and pleaded with her to introduce me to her sex worker members in order to help me understand. She would not help, telling me to look for them on the street. "They won't eat you alive. Never look down upon them."

Later, several sociologists told me that Ms Yip was trying to monopolise the media exposure of Hong Kong sex workers. Her sex workers' union had only a few members, mainly aged women, the majority of whom were humanitarian journalists. The union membership included only two or three old, retired prostitutes.

I had never expected it to be so difficult to find sex workers who would speak for themselves in Hong Kong – a place filled with chickens and ducks. I was now so fascinated by this confusion of thinking around the subject of prostitutes' rights that I became even more determined. The confusion only served to validate my initial impulse to interview, observe, think and write. It was necessary to escape from the maze of preconceptions and pundits with their eyes wide shut.

Even today, I cannot understand why I felt so strongly. I was not an academic researcher, nor did I receive any advance payment from a publisher. I was just someone whose imagination had been captured, and who could spend some time writing after work. That year, 1999, I spent all my spare time, and some personal savings, on the streets of Hong Kong interviewing nearly 50 hookers, toy boys, transsexual sex workers, mama-sans and brothel owners.

In the beginning, I was depressed by my small budget. I had no money to visit premises offering sex services, nor could I afford to interview sex workers by paying for their time.

Ironically, I would like to thank those who charged me extra for giving interviews. These sex workers, with whom I first managed to make

contact, were on the shortlist of informants available to professional journalists. The journalists had bigger budgets than I did, and worked against deadlines. The sex worker interviewees had learned that the journalists, who paid well, wanted colourful stories. They elaborated and embroidered accordingly. Reading the small body of literature available, certain accounts became strangely familiar. It was a case of sex workers selling their own urban legends as another form of prostitution.

My lack of funds meant I was not a victim of these apocryphal accounts and had to devote more time to making friends with sex workers rather than treating them merely as paid interview subjects. Although it was a much slower process, I gained genuine insights into real lives. My patience rewarded me with material quite different from commercial journalism, which is often quickly written against deadlines and full of sensational accounts designed to increase newspaper circulation.

Not being a hooker myself, how can I speak authentically? In Taiwan, a postgraduate wrote her dissertation *18 Hostesses* based on her decision to become a real-life hooker for the purpose of research. That's some book to read!

Annabel Chong is perhaps the most notorious example of research taken to the extreme. Curiosity and notions of empowerment eventually led this Singaporean gender studies student to engage in an organised gang bang, during which she had sex with 251 men in ten hours.

Despite these exploits, I believe the non-hooker perspective has its own edge. Various forms of commercial sex permeate society. Hong Kong is no different and has a huge variety of sex businesses including services to suit the most freakish and outlandish of tastes. Even if I did try to prostitute myself, I would likely end up digging my own tiny, burning pit of shame. Could my potentially narrow vision provide a valuable contribution to understanding the sex industry?

The original Chinese-language version of *Whispers and Moans* was serialised in Hong Kong's *Literary Century* magazine during 2000 and 2001. It was published as a book in 2002 and both editions sold out. The Japanese version came out in 2003, with further good sales. A version

in simplified Chinese characters for the mainland was blocked by the Central Bureau of Censorship in Beijing in 2003. The official reason for prohibiting its publication in mainland China was that it contained too many 'unhealthy' words (any description of sexuality is regarded as unhealthy in China). The real reason for rejection was the reform to the Marriage Law of 2002, which aimed to restore family moral values in China. Under this new law, any literature on affairs outside marriage is regarded as 'controversial' or 'spiritual pollution'. A book about sex workers stood little chance of acceptance.

On the other hand, the discussions opened in *Whispers and Moans* have been widely carried on in mainland China through a movie of the same title, directed by Herman Yau and scripted by myself. With a social realist approach, the movie dramatizes many of the true case studies in this book to portray typical characters found in the sex industry. Such a movie certainly cannot be approved by the film censors of the People's Republic, and thus cannot be distributed within China.

However, thanks to the availability of pirated DVDs and online video clips, it was not long before a heated discussion of the movie *Whispers and Moans* ensued on thousands of blogs and websites across China. Surprisingly, many of these web reviews were written by social workers, educators, public servants of family planning centres, and of course movie lovers, who shared the same sentiments and concerns about sex workers with my filmmaking colleagues. We were particularly surprised that some viewers on the mainland spent precious time translating the Cantonese dialogue of the movie into Putonghua, the national common language, and posted the translation on websites to help other mainland audiences understand the movie.

In this English-language edition of *Whispers and Moans*, I remain grateful for my original, naive impulse, without which I would never have found the determination to finish the book. I have continued to observe events and changes in the Hong Kong sex industry, and have come to see the characters in this book as more complex, and much more real.

In 2008, *Whispers and Moans Part II* was produced by the same group of filmmakers, with the subtitle *True Women For Sale*. The script of *Part II* was developed from two individual stories told in this book: Chapter 6 and Chapter 9. The second film was a huge success, not only gaining more audience support in mainland China through pirated DVDs, but also being selected as the opening movie of the 2008 Asian Film Festival, and winning Best Actress at the Golden Horse Film Festival, Asia's most important film awards ceremony.

Since then, film producers have often asked me to write a Part III screenplay, even though there are few stories in *Whispers and Moans* left to dramatize. One producer hoped to encourage me with a larger budget which would promise bigger success. But while his marketing plan was convincing, I cannot promise a Part III. I did the laborious research as a naive writer before I became an anthropologist. Now I know exactly how much additional fieldwork in the sex trade I would need to do before completing a realistic third screenplay. I just do not have the courage to do that hard work over again.

This book focuses on how Hong Kong prostitutes deal with the ruthless competition provided by mainland Chinese girls and manage to survive. Prostitutes from mainland China are increasingly encountered in cosmopolitan cities such as Tokyo, Paris, New York and London. The implications of this work are therefore not limited solely to Hong Kong society, but provide an insight into the global sex industry.